

THE LAW AND THE PROPHET

Ellen White's struggle to understand the law in Galatians

First of Four Parts

One of the most fascinating episodes in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church—the 1888 General Conference session held in Minneapolis—remains of interest not only as a historical drama but for the light it sheds on how even an inspired prophet must sometimes struggle with a theological issue before achieving full understanding.

The popular Adventist understanding of what happened in 1888—that a major segment of the church rejected the message of righteousness by faith—oversimplifies the matter. No one at the conference disputed the idea that righteousness is a gift not merited by works. Adventists had always believed this, at least in theory—though they overshadowed it by emphasizing the law. In fact, Ellen White made righteousness by faith the theme of her talks at the 1883 General Conference session, without arousing any controversy.¹

A dispute arose over the interpretation of Galatians 3:24, “The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ.” Traditionally, Adventists had seen this law as the ceremonial law. When Ellet J. Waggoner and Alonzo T. Jones began teaching that the law in

Galatians meant the moral law, the Ten Commandments, some Adventist ministers became upset.

Back in 1854 J. H. Waggoner (Ellet's father) had published a volume in which he maintained that the “added law” of Galatians 3:19 and the “schoolmaster” of verse 24 refers to the moral rather than the ceremonial law.² He was not the first to teach this; in the early days a majority of the brethren accepted this view.³ However, the tide of opinion seems to have turned by the mid-1850s, mainly because it proved to be a weak point in the Adventist debate with Sunday-keepers, who tried to capitalize on Galatians to show that the moral law no longer remained in force, that the Sabbath had been changed.

Stephen Pierce, who, like Waggoner, served as a corresponding editor of the *Review and Herald*, spent three days in a meeting refuting Waggoner's position by demonstrating that the law in Galatians meant both the moral and the ceremonial law. According to Uriah Smith, shortly after this Ellen White saw in vision the truth of the matter. She wrote to Waggoner that he was wrong and Pierce was right.⁴



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Unfortunately Pierce's “both-and” view was soon forgotten. Since Ellen White had condemned Waggoner's position, the opposite view—that the law in Galatians meant the ceremonial law—came to prevail among Adventists over the next quarter century.⁵

In the mid-1880s E. J. Waggoner revived his father's theory that the law in Galatians refers to the moral law.⁶

Letters of Displeasure

G. I. Butler, president of the General Conference, wrote a series of letters to Ellen White, who then lived in Switzerland, in which he expressed his displeasure that one man would advocate a theological view in print contrary to the established Adventist position, and thus cause dissension. Ellen White did not reply immediately, although she did write an article about that time for the *Review*, stating that individual judgment must submit to the authority of the church.⁷

Lacking a reply from Ellen White, Butler wrote an 85-page pamphlet to prove that the principal subject in Galatians was the ceremonial law,⁸ which he distributed to delegates at the 1886 General Conference session in Battle Creek. A theological commit-

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tee appointed at the session failed to reach a consensus on that point, but passed a resolution that minority doctrinal views not be published in Adventist journals until approved by "the leading brethren of experience."⁹

In February 1887 Ellen White finally wrote from Switzerland to Waggoner and Jones, taking Waggoner to task for teaching and publishing his controversial ideas.¹⁰ In this letter she stated an important principle: the truth or falsity of an idea might not be as important as its divisiveness. She had been shown that some of her husband's views, though correct, should not be publicized, because they would cause disunity. Some truths were "not vital points," and thus not worth fighting over. The church must present to the world a united front.

Waggoner's ideas proved not only divisive but also suspect, by reason of their similarity to his father's teaching on the two laws, which Ellen White had seen to be in error. Evidently Ellen White's memory of the episode was not entirely clear. "The matter does not lie clear and distinct in my mind yet. I cannot grasp the matter, and for this reason I am fully convinced that in the presenting, it has not only been untimely, but deleterious."¹¹

Ellen White's letter dismayed Waggoner but pleased Butler, who had received a copy. He felt happy to have the matter settled, with Ellen White, as he thought, on his side.¹² Butler wrote an article for the *Review* refuting Waggoner's position,¹³ and evidently took steps to prevent Waggoner from publishing a lengthy reply he had written in answer to Butler's pamphlet.

Short-lived Satisfaction

But Butler's satisfaction proved short-lived. Two months after writing to Waggoner and Jones, Ellen White sent a letter to the two main contestants on the other side of the controversy, G. I. Butler and Uriah Smith, editor of the *Review*.

"I was pained when I saw your article in the *Review*, and for the last half hour I have been reading the

references preceding your pamphlet [i.e., the introduction, in which Waggoner is rebuked for introducing controversy]. Now my brother, many of the things that you have said are all right. The principles that you refer to are right; but how this can harmonize with your pointed remarks to Dr. Waggoner, I cannot see. I think you are too sharp. And then when this is followed by a pamphlet published of your own views, be assured that I cannot feel that you are just right at this point to do this unless you give the same liberty to Dr. Waggoner."¹⁴

Regarding the theological issue itself, Ellen White remained uncertain. The early manuscript she had written to J. H. Waggoner, telling him that his position regarding the law was wrong, had become lost. "I am troubled; for the life of me I cannot remember that which I have been shown in reference to the two laws. I cannot remember what the caution and warning referred to were that were given to Elder Waggoner. It may be it was a caution not to make his ideas prominent at that time, for there was a great danger of disunion.

Neither Position Perfect

"Now I do not wish the letters that I have sent to you should be used in a way that you will take it for granted that your ideas are all correct and Dr. Waggoner's and Elder Jones's are all wrong. . . . I have had some impressive dreams that have led me to feel that you are not altogether in the light."¹⁵

In a letter written to Butler a year and a half later, Ellen White described a dream in which her angel guide "stretched out his arms toward Dr. Waggoner and to you, Elder Butler, and said in substance as follows: Neither have all the light upon the law; neither position is perfect."¹⁶

She rebuked Butler for the way he had treated Waggoner. "You must not think that the Lord has placed you in the position that you now occupy as the only men who are to decide as to whether any more light and truth shall come to God's people."¹⁷ She was not pleased with what had happened at the 1886 General Conference session,

nor with Butler's claim that his present illness resulted from shock because she did not support his stand on the law in Galatians.

Thus Ellen White attempted to maintain a fragile balance between the two sides. Though unable to reach a decision on the doctrinal issue, she hoped to maintain unity without sacrificing fairness. Unfortunately, unity proved elusive. □

To be continued

REFERENCES

- ¹ The *Review* and *Herald* published these talks between April 15 and July 8, 1884. *Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 350-354, and *Selected Messages*, book 3, pp. 148-152, contain relevant excerpts.
- ² J. H. Waggoner, *The Law of God: An Examination of the Testimony of Both Testaments* (Rochester, N.Y.: Adventist Review Office, 1854), pp. 80, 81. Waggoner claimed that "not a single declaration" in Galatians "referred to the ceremonial or Levitical law"; that the book "treats solely of the moral law" (p. 74).
- ³ G. I. Butler, *The Law in the Book of Galatians* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Review and Herald Pub. House, 1886), p. 3. J. N. Andrews earlier took this position in "Discourse with Brother [H. E.] Carver," *Review and Herald*, Sept. 16, 1851, and "Watchman, What of the Night?" *Review and Herald*, May 27, 1852, as did James White, in "Justified by the Law," *Review and Herald*, June 10, 1852.
- ⁴ Uriah Smith to W. A. McCutchen, Aug. 8, 1901. Smith published an article by Pierce defending his position in "Answer to Brother Merriam's Question Respecting the Law of Galatians 3," *Review and Herald*, Oct. 8, 1857.
- ⁵ See *Review* and *Herald* articles by R. F. Cottrell, Feb. 16, 1860; *Review and Herald*, F. Krummacher, Jan. 28, 1862; Moses Hull, Apr. 22 to May 13, 1862; R. F. Cottrell, July 17, 1866; J. N. Andrews, Feb. 9, 1869; H. A. St. John, July 9, 1872; H. M. Van Slyke, Aug. 20, 1872; A. Campbell, Sept. 10, 1872; Albert Weeks, Dec. 10, 1872; R. M. Kilgore, Mar. 24, 1874; D. M. Canright, June 10, 1875; Joseph Clarke, Apr. 6, 1876; D. M. Canright, Jan. 31, 1878. See also Uriah Smith, *Both Sides on the Sabbath and the Law: Review of T. M. Preble* (Battle Creek, Mich.: SDA Publishing Assn., 1864).
- ⁶ As early as 1884 Waggoner saw the law in Galatians 3 as the moral law ("Under the Law," *Signs of the Times*, Sept. 11, 1884). But the series of articles published in the *Signs* from July 8 to September 2, 1886, provoked the worst controversy.
- ⁷ Ellen G. White, "Unity of the Church," *Review and Herald*, Jan. 25, 1887. Cf. *Testimonies*, vol. 5, pp. 291-293, written two years earlier.
- ⁸ Butler, *The Law in the Book of Galatians*.
- ⁹ *Review and Herald*, Dec. 14, 1886.
- ¹⁰ Letter 28, 1887; slightly abbreviated in letter 37, 1887, printed in *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, pp. 75-82.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² E. J. Waggoner to Ellen White, quoted in David P. McMahon, *Ellet Joseph Waggoner: The Myth and the Man* (Fallbrook, Calif.: Verdict Publications, 1979), p. 89; G. I. Butler to Ellen White, Mar. 31, 1887, quoted in Emmett K. Vandever, *Rugged Heart: The Story of George I. Butler* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Pub. Assn., 1979), p. 86.
- ¹³ Butler, "Laws Which Are 'Contrary to Us,' a 'Yoke of Bondage,' and 'Not Good,'" *Review and Herald*, Mar. 22, 1887.
- ¹⁴ Letter 13, 1887.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Letter 21, 1888, written from Minneapolis during the precession Bible Conference.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*

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USING THE LAW TO NO PROFIT

Ellen White pleaded with ministers who argued over the law.

Second of Four Parts

Part one of this series described events leading up to the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference session to illustrate how Ellen White's understanding of the law in Galatians progressed along with that of nearly all Adventists, in spite of the fact that she was an inspired prophet. Though not clear on whether the "schoolmaster" in Galatians 3:24 meant the moral or ceremonial law (having forgotten her previous statement), she was clear that men such as E. J. Waggoner and G. I. Butler ought not to be arguing publicly over the matter.

The Minneapolis General Conference session of 1888 started off on the wrong foot, with a presession Bible conference that featured a debate between A. T. Jones and Uriah Smith over the identity of the 10 horns of Daniel 7.

General Conference president G. I. Butler was absent because of illness (the result, he claimed, of Ellen White's opposition to his position on the law in Galatians), but many of his associates attended the meeting with pointed instruction to "stand by the old landmarks."

E. J. Waggoner presented 11 sermons at the conference on the topic of justification by faith and the righteousness of Christ in relation to the law.¹ The talks generated much prejudice among those who felt that these young upstarts, Waggoner and Jones, were denying one of the fundamentals of the faith in identifying the "schoolmaster" of Galatians 3:24 with the moral law and making the moral

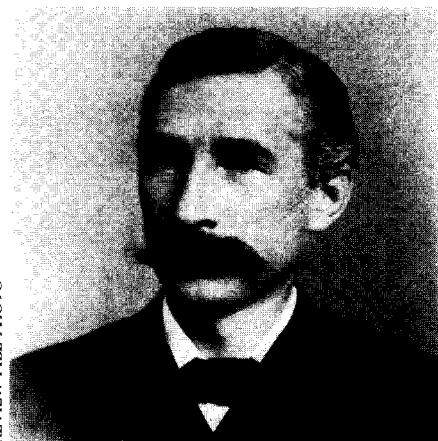
law part of the old covenant, although these were merely ancillary to his main point: the law cannot save anyone.

The general objection voiced by Iowa Conference president J. H. Morrison was that Adventists had always believed in justification by faith, but that overemphasis on this topic by Waggoner would result in the law losing its central place in the third angel's message. Even Ellen White's support of Waggoner did not quell the controversy. Opponents questioned her neutrality because she had associated with Jones and Waggoner on the Pacific Coast just before the session.

One morning Ellen White called a few delegates together to read them some material she had written. Someone asked her whether the Lord had any new light for the church. "Most assuredly," she said. Did she wish the present discussion to be halted? "By no means," she replied. "We want all on both sides of the question." But, she continued, the discussion should be carried on in a Christlike spirit, and not in a debating style.

"The remark was made, 'If our views of Galatians are not correct, then we have not the third angel's message, and our position goes by the board; there is nothing to our faith.' I

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Some Adventists honestly thought A. T. Jones had denied one of the "old landmarks" of the Adventist faith.

said, 'Brethren, here is the very thing I have been telling you. This statement is not true. It is an extravagant, exaggerated statement. . . . The question at issue is not a vital question and should not be treated as such. The wonderful importance and magnitude of this subject has been exaggerated, and for this reason—through misconception and perverted ideas—we see the spirit that prevails at this meeting, which is unchristlike, and which we should never see exhibited among brethren. There has been a spirit of Pharisaism coming in among us which I shall lift my voice against whenever it may be revealed.'"²

Elder R. M. Kilgore objected to the law in Galatians being presented in Butler's absence and moved that discussion on the subject be postponed until he could be present. Ellen White stood up and said, in essence, "Brethren, this is the Lord's work. Does the Lord want His work to wait for Elder Butler? The Lord wants His work to go forward and not wait for any man."³

Ellen White's comments on this incident, in manuscript 24, 1888 (omitted from *Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 175), are very revealing, for they pinpoint the exact moment that she began to have doubts on the church's traditional position on the law in Galatians:

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"I was surprised to hear Elder Kilgore make the kind of speech he did before a large audience of believers and unbelievers—a speech which I knew could not be dictated by the Spirit of the Lord. He was followed by Elder Smith, who made remarks of the same order, before Brother Morrison began his talk, which was all calculated to create sympathy which I knew was not after God's order. It was human but not divine. And for the first time I began to think it might be we did not hold correct views, after all, upon the law in Galatians, for the truth required no such spirit to sustain it. . . .

"I returned to my room questioning what was the best course for me to pursue. Many hours that night were spent in prayer in regard to the law in Galatians. This was a mere mote. Whichever way was in accordance with a 'Thus saith the Lord,' my soul would say, Amen, and Amen. But the spirit that was controlling our brethren was so unlike the spirit of Jesus, so contrary to the spirit that should be exercised toward each other, it filled my soul with anguish." (Italics supplied.)

The next day, in her morning talk,⁴ Ellen White rebuked Elder Kilgore for attempting to halt the discussion in Butler's absence. Morrison also received censure. It was not right "to fasten ourselves upon the ideas of any one man"; the truth would stand without Elder Butler having to define it for others. They needed not only harmony but an open investigation of "every line of truth." Ellen White did not seem very pleased with the "good brother" who had told her that "everything was settled and our old position was all right."

Replying to rumors that she had changed and come under the influence of Waggoner, she said:

"Well, one says, 'Your prayers and your talk run in the channel with Dr. Waggoner.' I want to tell you, my brethren, that I have not taken any position; I have had no talk with the doctor nor with anyone on this subject, and am not prepared to take a position yet. By their fruits ye shall know them. . . .

"Now, we did not intimate one word that we did not want that subject taken up. We did want an investigation, but I cannot take my position on either side until I have studied the question."⁵

After reaffirming her neutrality, Ellen White revealed that the loss of an early manuscript to J. H. Waggoner regarding the law, which might have resolved the issue at once, had proved providential. "Why was it that I lost the manuscript and for two years could not find it? God has a purpose in this. He wants us to go to the Bible and get the Scripture evidence. I shall find it again and present it to you. But this investigation must go forward."⁶ (The manuscript apparently never was recovered.)

Doubts About Waggoner's Position

Although Ellen White had most emphatically endorsed Waggoner's teaching on the righteousness of Christ, she still had doubts about his position on the law in Galatians, for in her last sermon at Minneapolis, she publicly stated:

"Dr. Waggoner has spoken to us in a straightforward manner. There is precious light in what he has said. Some things presented in reference to the law in Galatians, if I fully understand his position, do not harmonize with the understanding I have had of this subject; but truth will lose nothing by investigation. . . . Some interpretations of Scripture given by Dr. Waggoner I do not regard as correct. But I believe him to be perfectly honest in his views, and I would respect his feelings and treat him as a Christian gentleman. . . . Even if the position which we have held on the two laws is truth, the Spirit of truth will not countenance any such measures to defend it as many of you would take."⁷

On December 9, 1888, five weeks after the Minneapolis conference ended, Ellen White confirmed the fact that her views on the law in Galatians had not changed: "I have not changed my views in reference to the law in Galatians, but I hope that I shall never be left to entertain the spirit that was brought into the General Conference. I

have not the least hesitancy in saying that it was not the Spirit of God. If every idea we have entertained in doctrine is truth, will not the truth bear to be investigated? Will it totter and fall if criticized? If so, let it fall, the sooner the better. The spirit that would close the door to investigation of points of truth in a Christlike manner is not the spirit from above."⁸

During 1889 Ellen White, Jones, and Waggoner preached at various camp meetings on the righteousness of Christ. They generally encountered much less opposition than at Minneapolis. Ellen White's writings show an increased emphasis on righteousness by faith during this time.⁹

Smith, Butler, and others honestly thought Jones and Waggoner had denied certain of the "old landmarks." But the law in Galatians, wrote Ellen White, was not a landmark:

"The law in Galatians is not a vital question and never has been. Those who have called it one of the old landmarks simply do not know what they are talking about. It never was an old landmark, and it never will become such. . . .

"I am forced, by the attitude my brethren have taken and the spirit evidenced, to say, 'God deliver me from your ideas of the law in Galatians, if the receiving of these ideas would make me so unchristian in my spirit, words, and works as many who ought to know better have been.'"¹⁰ □

REFERENCES

¹ According to Ellen White, manuscript 24, 1888 (Selected Messages, book 3, p. 168).

² Manuscript 24, 1888. This is one of the best extant eyewitness reports of the Minneapolis conference, written a few weeks after it closed. See Selected Messages, book 3, pp. 163-177.

³ In L. E. Froom, Movement of Destiny (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1971), p. 246.

⁴ Manuscript 9, 1888, in A. V. Olson, Thirteen Crisis Years (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1981), pp. 300-303.

⁵ In Olson, p. 302.

⁶ Ibid., p. 302.

⁷ From manuscript 15, 1888, in Olson, pp. 303-305.

⁸ Letter 7, 1888. Ellen White reaffirmed that she had not changed her position at Minneapolis or since in letter 3, 1889.

⁹ The acme of Ellen White's renewed emphasis on righteousness by faith is perhaps expressed in manuscript 36, 1890, published in Faith and Works, pp. 15-28.

¹⁰ Manuscript 55, 1890. Cf. the list of the "landmarks" in Counsels to Writers and Editors, pp. 30, 31, written about this time.

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THE LAW OF THE PROPHET

**Ellen White's constant rule:
correct practice is more
important than correct theory**

Third of Four Parts

The first two parts of this series described events surrounding the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference session, when leading ministers debated identity of the law referred to in Galatians that was to lead us to Christ. Ellen White encouraged examination of the church's beliefs, but in a Christian spirit. She had not made up her own mind on the subject, but saw it as less important than did some of her brethren.

The prophet was willing to learn. But what about her brethren?

In an 1890 meeting of prominent leaders in Battle Creek, Ellen White hoped for a general confession for the way they had treated the 1888 message and messengers. Instead, "the law in Galatians was their only plea." Some said, "It is Sister White's mind, her opinions; and her opinions are no better than our opinions, unless it is something she has seen in vision." The leaders' skepticism and theological quibbles tried Ellen White's patience.

"Why," I asked, "is your interpretation of the law in Galatians more dear to you, and you more zealous to maintain your ideas on this point, than to acknowledge the workings of the Spirit of God? You have been weighing every precious heaven-sent testimony by your own scales as you interpreted the law in Galatians. . . .

"I say if your views on the law in Galatians, and the fruits, are of the character I have seen in Minneapolis and ever since up to this time, my prayer is that I may be as far from your understanding and interpretation of the Scriptures as it is possible for me to be. . . . You could not have given a better refutation of your own theories than you have done.

"Now, brethren, I have nothing to say, no burden in regard to the law in Galatians. This matter looks to me of minor consequence in comparison with the spirit you have brought into your faith."

For the next five years Ellen White had little to say about the topic. Not until 1896 did she endorse the position that Galatians 3:24 referred largely to the moral law.

"The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith." In this scripture, the Holy Spirit through the apostle is speaking especially of the moral law. The law reveals sin to us, and causes us to feel our need of Christ and to flee unto Him for pardon and peace by exercising repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.



Ellen G. White

"An unwillingness to yield up preconceived opinions, and to accept this truth, lay at the foundation of a large share of the opposition manifested at Minneapolis against the Lord's message through Brethren Waggoner and Jones."²

This should have settled the matter. But around the turn of the century, the controversy over the law in Galatians enjoyed a brief revival.³ Again asked to state her position, Ellen White indicated that (as is often the case) the "either-or" controversy had a "both-and" solution. "I am asked concerning the law in Galatians. What law is the schoolmaster to bring us to Christ? I answer: both the ceremonial and the moral code of ten commandments."⁴ Uriah Smith, recently restored to the position of *Review* editor. He published a series of articles advocating the old position.⁵ Alarmed, General conference president A. G. Daniels took steps to counteract the revival of a position long since set aside.⁶ Ellen White insisted that the matter be dropped.

"Never should that which God has not given as a test be carried as was the subject of the law in Galatians. I have

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been instructed that the terrible experience at the Minneapolis conference is one of the saddest chapters in the history of the believers in present truth. God forbids that the subject of the two laws should ever again be agitated as it then was. Some are not yet healed of their defection and would plunge into this subject once more. Should they do this, differences of opinion would again create division. This question must not be revived.”⁷

The law-in-Galatians controversy presents a clear example of an inspired prophet receiving light from a human source, as Ellen White herself recognized.⁸ Prophets do not have infallible insight into all theological problems. They must wait upon light from the Lord—light that may come through books and sermons, as well as dreams and visions.

Yet Ellen White did not accept uncritically everything that Jones and Waggoner taught. Shortly after the 1888 Minneapolis session, she publicly condemned a position that Waggoner presented—that Christ was incapable of sinning.⁹ In 1893 she rejected some of A. T. Jones’s extreme statements on righteousness by faith.¹⁰ And although she came into general agreement with Waggoner’s interpretation of the law in Galatians, she never endorsed his position that Galatians 3:24 referred *exclusively* to the moral law,¹¹ but stated only that it referred especially to that law, implying that it also referred to the ceremonial law.

Evolution in Understanding

This 1896 statement did not contradict Ellen White’s earlier endorsement of Pierce’s position. Indeed, her 1900 statement on the subject—that the law in Galatians 3:24 is both moral and ceremonial—agreed with that position. These statements clearly show an evolution in Ellen White’s understanding of the law in Galatians. The evidence indicates that, having forgotten what she was shown earlier, she held no firm opinion on the matter until the early 1890s. Then the light God had sent her through Waggoner’s preaching and the animosity she saw

Clearly, her understanding of this issue developed over time.

displayed by his opponents made her realize that her previous understanding was incomplete. This compelled her to emphasize the moral law aspect of Galatians 3:24 before she finally recovered the mediating position of Stephen Pierce. Clearly, her understanding of this issue developed over time.

Ellen White maintained one constant theme throughout the controversy: Correct practice is more important than correct theory. “It is not so essential to understand the precise particulars in regard to the relation of the two laws. It is of far greater consequence that we know whether we are transgressing the law of God, whether we stand in obedience or disobedience before the holy precepts.”¹²

For Ellen White the question was What kind of fruit does the new teaching bear? Does it result in greater love and church unity? If not, then either it is not truth or else it is not present truth.

Truths that “are not calculated to unite the flock and sanctify the soul” may not be present truth.¹³ In 1858 Ellen White rebuked a man who taught that church members should abstain from swine’s flesh, because God would “lead His people no faster than they could receive and act upon the important truths that are communicated to them.”¹⁴ and the church was not yet ready for this. Similarly, the early teachings of J. H. Waggoner, though containing much of value, might have split the church in the critical formative stages of its development. Hence she cautioned him “not to make his ideas prominent at that time, for there was great danger of disunion.”¹⁵

It soon became apparent, however, that controversy was inevitable. This being the case, Ellen White endorsed

Waggoner’s message after hearing him preach, for she realized that it could bring revival to the church. “That which God gives His servants to speak today would not perhaps have been present truth twenty years ago,” she said in one of her Minneapolis sermons, “but it is God’s message for this time.”¹⁶ □

To be concluded

REFERENCES

- ¹ Letter 83, Mar. 13, 1890.
- ² From letter 96, 1896, printed in *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 234. Over the next four years Ellen White made several other statements identifying Galatians 3:24 with the moral law. See *Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 213, 341; *The Desire of Ages*, p. 308.
- ³ E. J. Waggoner published a series of articles on Galatians in *Signs of the Times*, Nov. 24, 1898, through May 17, 1899; followed by an even longer series by A. T. Jones in the *Review and Herald*, July 25, 1899, through Nov. 13, 1900; and Waggoner published two books: *The Glad Tidings* (Oakland, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Co., 1900) and *The Everlasting Covenant* (London: International Tract Society, 1900).
- ⁴ Manuscript 87, 1900 (*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 233). Cf. A. T. Jones, *Review and Herald*, August 8, 1899, p. 508.
- ⁵ William Brickey, “Notes on the Book of Galatians,” *Review and Herald*, Jan. 21 through Feb. 4, 1902.
- ⁶ A. G. Daniels to G. I. Butler, Apr. 11, 1902; and Daniels to W. C. White, Apr. 14, 1902.
- ⁷ Letter 179, Nov. 19, 1902.
- ⁸ “The Lord has been pleased to give me great light, yet I know that He leads other minds, and opens to them the mysteries of His Word, and I want to receive every ray of light that God shall send me, though it should come through the humblest of His servants” (manuscript 15, 1888, a transcript of Ellen White’s last sermon at Minneapolis, in A. V. Olson, *Thirteen Crisis Years* [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1981], pp. 303-311). “There are errors in the church, and the Lord points them out by His own ordained agencies, not always through the testimonies” (letter 11, 1890, in *Selected Messages*, book 2, p. 81).
- ⁹ An eyewitness account appears in Lauretta Eby Kress and Daniel Hartman Kress, *Under the Guiding Hand* (Washington, D.C.: College Press, 1932), pp. 113, 114. Ellen White’s statements rejecting the position that Christ could not sin date from this incident. (See *The SDA Bible Commentary*, Ellen G. White Comments, vol. 5, p. 1128; *The Desire of Ages*, p. 117.)
- ¹⁰ Letter 44, 1893, in *Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 377-379.
- ¹¹ E. J. Waggoner, *The Gospel in the Book of Galatians* (Oakland: Pacific Press Pub. Co., 1888), p. 43; cf. pp. 17, 21, 22.
- ¹² Letter 165, 1901, in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, Ellen G. White Comments, vol. 6, p. 1110.
- ¹³ *Early Writings*, p. 63. See also *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 127, 128; *The Great Controversy*, p. 609; *Testimonies*, vol. 2, pp. 692, 693; *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, p. 77.
- ¹⁴ *Testimonies*, vol. 1, p. 207.
- ¹⁵ Letter 13, 1887.
- ¹⁶ Manuscript 8a, 1888, in Olson, pp. 272-285.

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A LAW WITHOUT PROFIT

Ellen White opposed a church creed as harmful to growth and unity.

Fourth of Four Parts

The first three parts of the series employed the debate over the law in Galatians surrounding the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference session to illustrate that even a prophet's understanding of theology may develop over a period of time. Not until 1900 did Ellen White take a stand on the matter, having forgotten what she wrote earlier. Her understanding came from human as well as divine sources. She pleaded with ministers to cease arguing over the subject, which was not as important as they deemed it.

A Seventh-day Adventist creed? Don't think it was never attempted! An unsuccessful attempt on the part of "half a dozen influential ministers" to force a creed on the church in order to quell its controversy appears as one fascinating but little-known facet of the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference session.¹ This incident and its aftermath have important implications for the church today.

During the conference a committee of administrators proposed that "nothing be taught in our school at Battle Creek contrary to what has been taught in the past, or as approved by the General Conference Committee."² They aimed this proposal at A. T. Jones, who would teach Bible the next year at the college.

Ellen White voiced her opposition to the proposal, "declaring that God had revealed to her that such a resolution was wrong and dangerous.

... 'I admonish you to refrain from voting it.'"³

That motion was defeated, but another passed recommending "that persons holding views different from those commonly taught by us as a denomination" submit them to their local conference committee, which if it saw light in them would present them to the State Institute, which might then present them to the General Conference Institute.⁴

Before the conference ended, Ellen White stated her position in a sermon: "Instructors in our schools should never be bound about by being told that they are to teach only what has been taught hitherto. Away with these restrictions. There is a God to give the message His people shall speak. Let

No statement of faith, however perfect, can ever stand as a final one.



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E. J. Waggoner

not any minister feel under bonds or be gauged by men's measurement. . . . That which God gives His servants to speak today would not perhaps have been present truth twenty years ago, but it is God's message for this time."⁵

Soon afterward she wrote, "When the resolution was urged upon the conference that nothing should be taught in the college contrary to that which has been taught, I felt deeply, for I knew whoever framed that resolution was not aware of what he was doing."⁶ Such a resolution would perpetuate errors that had been taught at the college, such as the recent mistaken ideas on inspiration.⁷

Another reason for Ellen White's opposition: "There was to be special light for God's people as they neared the closing scenes of this earth's history. . . . It would be impossible for us to state just how this additional light would come. . . . Would it be right that every avenue should be closed in our school so that the students could not have the benefit of this light?"⁸

Besides the fact that creedal resolutions serve to perpetuate old error and shut out new truth, they are incapable of producing true unity: "We cannot then take a position that the unity of the church consists in viewing every text of Scripture in the very same light.

BY TIM CROSBY

The church may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement of opinions, but we cannot force the mind and will, and thus root out disagreement. These resolutions may conceal the discord; but they cannot quench it, and establish perfect agreement. Nothing can perfect unity in the

treated her family in Portland, Maine, when expelling them for becoming Millerites. "Shall there be with the people of God . . . the very same spirit which they have condemned in the denominations, because there was a difference of understanding on some points—not

Creeds present a presumption of infallibility that puts a stop to the continual unfolding of new truth.

church but the spirit of Christlike forbearance."⁹

The resolution passed by the brethren provided the impetus for a series of statements by Ellen White over the next 12 years opposing a church creed. In an 1889 sermon she said, "It is not how many years have I believed that makes it the truth. You must bring your creed to the Bible and let the light of the Bible define your creed."¹⁰

Creeds present a presumption of infallibility that puts a stop to the continual unfolding of new truth. No statement of faith, however perfect, can ever stand as a final one.

Varieties of Fruit

Disillusionment over the un-Christlike behavior of church leaders became the dominant theme of Ellen White's post-1888 statements on the law-in-Galatians controversy. "To the law and to the testimony" seemed not as helpful as "by their fruits ye shall know them." While the message of Jones and Waggoner produced the fruits of repentance in many, some in church leadership bore a different variety of fruit. The issue of how Christians should relate to doctrinal controversy overshadowed for a time the question of which side was actually correct.

The way the brethren treated Jones and Waggoner reminded Ellen White of the way the Methodist church had

vital questions? Shall the same spirit in any form be cherished among Seventh-day Adventists—the cooling of friendship, the withdrawal of confidence, the misrepresentation of motives, the endeavor to thwart and turn into ridicule those who honestly differ with them?"¹¹

"Much has been lost because our ministers and people have concluded that we have had all the truth essential for us as a people; but such a conclusion is erroneous and in harmony with the deceptions of Satan; for truth will be constantly unfolding."¹²

The overbearing attitude of the church leaders during this time provoked some unusually strong statements from the pen of Ellen White regarding their attempt to suppress what they considered to be false teaching. Commenting on "the spirit which ran riot at Minneapolis," she wrote: "Men in authority are not always to be obeyed, even though they may profess to be teachers of Bible doctrine. There are many today who feel indignant and aggrieved that any voice should be raised presenting ideas that differ from their own in regard to points of religious belief. . . . But we see that the God of heaven sometimes commissions men to teach that which is regarded as contrary to the established doctrines."¹³

While complete doctrinal unity seems ideal, lack of doctrinal contro-

versy does not necessarily constitute a good sign. Doctrinal agitation is preferable to an attitude of smug satisfaction with the present teaching of the church.¹⁴ "We may discover errors in our interpretation of Scripture."¹⁵ "As long as we hold to our own ideas and opinions with determined persistence, we cannot have the unity for which Christ prayed."¹⁶ The wisdom of this counsel has been proven several times, as the church has modified its stand on issues such as the Trinity and the battle of Armageddon.

It must be remembered that the issue here was not a vital point. When the church's teaching on the fundamentals of the faith was challenged, Ellen White sided with the traditional position, stressing the inviolability of these teachings and emphasizing that no teacher or minister should be employed who questioned them.¹⁷

However, even between 1903 and 1908, when the church faced serious defections over heresy, Ellen White never suggested a creed. "The best way to deal with error," she wrote in 1892, "is to present the truth."¹⁸ She had strong confidence that, given a fair hearing, truth would prevail. □

Concluded

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- ² LeRoy Edwin Froom, *Movement of Destiny* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1971), p. 253.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 254.
- ⁴ *Review and Herald*, Nov. 13, 1888.
- ⁵ Manuscript 8a, 1888, quoted in Froom, p. 225.
- ⁶ Manuscript 16, 1889.
- ⁷ See Ellen G. White letter 22, 1889, and *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 23.
- ⁸ Letter 22, 1889.
- ⁹ Manuscript 24, 1892.
- ¹⁰ *Faith and Works*, p. 77.
- ¹¹ Manuscript 30, 1889.
- ¹² *Signs of the Times*, May 26, 1890.
- ¹³ See entire context in *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 69-77. Other statements of hers occur in *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 105-111; *Review and Herald*, Aug. 27, 1889; July 26, 1892; Aug. 7, 1894; and *Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 411-416.
- ¹⁴ *Testimonies*, vol. 5, pp. 707, 708.
- ¹⁵ *Review and Herald*, July 12, 1898.
- ¹⁶ *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 37. See also *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, pp. 28-54.
- ¹⁷ "Any man who seeks to present theories which would lead us from the light that has come to us on the ministration in the heavenly sanctuary should not be accepted as a teacher" (manuscript 125, 1907). "Those who would tear down the foundation that God has laid are not to be accepted as the teachers and leaders of His people" (*Special Testimonies*, Series B, No. 7 [October 1903], p. 41). Cf. *Testimonies*, vol. 1, pp. 326, 327.
- ¹⁸ *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 165.

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